

*Comrade: Bill Anderson: A Communist, Working-Class Life*  
By Cybèle Locke, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2022.  
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Reviewed by Ross Webb

In 2011, Nick Salvatore reflected on the ‘intimate relationship’ between biography and social history. Challenging the suggestions made by some historians that biography was outside the ‘discipline of history’, Salvatore argued that the recent turn to biography in labour and social history was a welcome development. It opened the possibility of a broader understanding of ‘the interplay between an individual and social forces beyond one’s ability to control’. Such biography, he continued, could shed light far beyond any individual, even if it does not always reach into every corner of social life’. Like any historical work, however, it demanded a ‘disciplinary rigor and thorough research effort that treats equally seriously both the subject and the context that shapes that life’. In his excellent biography, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, Salvatore referred to the book as a ‘social biography’, one that ‘intended to explore both the individual and the broader social context’.

This is the approach taken by Cybèle Locke in *Comrade: Bill Andersen: A communist, working-class life*. Like Salvatore, Locke calls her book a ‘social biography’, one that aims to bring both Andersen, and other 1920s-born communists, ‘into the light’. By ‘into the light’, I think Locke means to add colour to people often reduced to stereotype. ‘Trade union leaders of Bill’s era’, Locke writes, ‘often appear in New Zealand histories as weathered, grey-coated men from another age, gruff and slightly sinister, holding the country to ransom with strikes’ (2). In this Locke succeeds. In *Comrade*, the trade union movement is presented as a movement not solely focused on arbitration, wages, and petty conflicts over the minutia of work rules, but rather one deeply connected with other facets of life. More on this below. Moreover, the book adds more colour to our understanding of postwar New Zealand communism and communists. Once again, the stereotype of doctrinaire debates about theory is replaced by a group of people deeply connected to the working-class, to anti-racism, anti-apartheid, anti-war and peace movements, and even to rugby league, as Ryan Bodman’s recent book has shown. In many cases, these communist trade union leaders were well ahead of the times.

But the ‘social biography’ approach was also necessitated by the lack of written sources from Andersen. As Locke notes in the introduction, Andersen’s ‘inner life’ is not revealed in written records; he did not keep private journals. Locke notes that she has only seen two personal letters, both written to his sister, Doll McElwain, during the Second World War. One of those 1945 letters, quoted in the first chapter, gives a striking picture of highly principled man with a keen sense of workers’ rights right from the beginning: ‘I shall always follow my principles Doll & nobody can stop me’ (24). That theme – a principled man who will not deviate in the face of opposition – is constant throughout the book. In the absence of written sources, Locke draws on oral histories, forty in all, with those who knew Andersen. Locke writes, ‘Their memories of friendship, love, mentoring, and solidarity, as well as threat, betrayal and conflict, reveal Bill’s humanity and his fallibility in the context of his times’. ‘Social biography’ also fits within Andersen’s own worldview; the class struggle and political action he was involved in was a collective enterprise, a product of social and economic force, and of large scale democratic union organising and action, not simply the result of key leaders. Even so, Andersen was a key leader, but one that was willing to channel larger forces. His worldview and politics would also be challenged by movements and events around him, as Locke outlines.

This book proceeds in a chronological fashion. It begins with Andersen's birth in 1924. In contrast to biographies that often dwell on—and perhaps make too much of—childhood, the details of Andersen's early life and family are passed over briefly, and the book quickly proceeds, by page 13, to Andersen as a 16 year old lying about his age to join the army. The preceding pages do, however, provide important context, both for Andersen and for the society at large: we learn about working class life in Auckland before and during the Great Depression, and the reforms of the First Labour Government. Andersen was dismissed from the army within three months, and soon found himself working as a fireman on the tug P.S *Lyttleton*, and then in the merchant navy and a member of the New Zealand Seaman's Union. A key turning point came when Andersen witnessed poverty and class inequality in the Middle East ports; Andersen reported years later that such a system that allowed for 'this sort of inhumane exploitation must be an intolerable system'. On his return to England, he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. And on his return to New Zealand after the war, he returned a 'glasses-wearing, card-carrying communist with a hatred of racism and imperialism, suspicious of union officials but committed to trade unionism.'

Over the following Chapter, we get an insight into the New Zealand communist movement in the immediate postwar period, Andersen's communist education, his early married life with Flora Cameron, and the developing peace, anti-nuclear, and anti-conscription movement. The hardening anti-communist climate of the post-war years came to a head with the 1951 waterfront lock, the subject of Chapter Three. Andersen was part of the strike committee, and, following his blacklisting, found work as a driver, and he joined the Northern Drivers Union (NDU); by 1954 he was a full time union official. The 1951 lockout taught Andersen a valuable lesson: to avoid a 'head on' collision with the government and employers 'with only a militant minority of unions and a seriously divided union movement'. As Locke writes, Andersen now understood that the 'job was to build a united front'. It was a lesson that would remain with him for much of his life. Building a strong and democratic union movement within the NDU would also be a major theme of the remainder of his life. Chapter Four details the changing national and international context of the cold war between 1954 and 1960 and examines Andersen's role as a union official, his views and the surrounding debate about peace and social justice, the changing international context and its domestic impacts (particularly following the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary), equal pay, and changes within the local union movement.

By the 1960s and 1970s, social and economic change saw working class discontent and the rise of social movements challenging racism at home and abroad. The international context also saw further splits in the local communist movement, with the eventual emergence of the Soviet aligned Socialist Unity Party (SUP) in 1966. This is the subject of Chapters Five through Seven. In a sense, Locke is re-telling some well-known developments of the decades. For the general reader, though, this is essential context. Examining these developments through the prism of Andersen's life and perhaps through the lens of the trade union movements, meanwhile, demonstrates the critical connections and collaborations between the movements, and the challenges they posed to one another. At times, there is too much context, and the narrative loses sight of Andersen as the main character.

Chapter Eight focuses on a key event in the mythology of Andersen: his 1974 imprisonment and then release following a massive industrial stoppage in the context of economic crisis, and the rise of Robert Muldoon. From then on, Andersen was a household name, and a key focus of political hostility. The following chapters on the Muldoon years, the Fourth Labour Government, and the National Government after 1990 are really the peak of the book's narrative. Once again, we see how key the trade union movement was in the fight for Maori

rights and other social activism of the time, including the Anti-Apartheid movement. But it was also a period of division. As Locke recounts, the trade union movement split on a number of key issues: on strategy, on Maori sovereignty, and most particularly on how to respond to the economic restructuring after 1984, and the Employment Contracts Act in 1991. The final chapters detailing the period between 1993 and 2005 deal with a period much less studied and understood; the story often ends in 1991, and Locke brings the story into our own times. Perhaps those final decades are the most crucial to understand for those wanting to rebuild the union movement and the left more broadly; in many ways, they look the most like our own era.

What does Locke make of Andersen's legacy? For Locke, Andersen – and particularly his leadership of the Northern Drivers Union – represented the best of trade unionism: a movement able to fight for workers, but also against war, empire, racism and sexism. Yet Locke is also critical of Andersen for his participation in a sectarianism that undermined the broader communist movement. Locke is critical, too, – as Andersen was himself on reflection – about the CTU and SUP's adoption of corporatist unionism as a response to economic restructuring by 1987-1988.

There were questions I thought were left unanswered and topics not explored in enough detail. First, the question of Andersen's commitment to the Soviet Union during this period of significant change is dealt with rather lightly. Where it influences the creation of the Socialist Unity Party in 1966 following the Sino-Soviet Split, Locke goes into detail. Yet there were key junctures and debates in the post-1970s period that I thought were skimmed over rather briefly. Andersen's opposition to the war in Vietnam and to apartheid in South Africa are admirable; both receive much focus by Locke. Yet the debate about, for example, the response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Polish *Solidarity* movement, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union could have been examined further. It is true, of course, that anti-communists used these events in an attempt to discredit the SUP and communists more broadly; contemporaries, and Locke, are cynical about this, and rightly so. Yet the events also caused rifts within the left and sparked necessary debate about ongoing commitment to the Soviet Union. Andersen was no blind doctrinaire and did change his views on a number of matters. Why was his commitment to the Soviet Union a position he would not waver from?

Second, I assumed that the story of surveillance of Andersen's life would feature more. Perhaps most famously, following a broadcast to the nation, Muldoon released a list of thirty-two union officials who he accused of being members of the SUP, supplied by the Security Intelligence Service (SIS). This receives only passing mention. The book ends by stating that Bill's 'communist movements were watched and constantly reported by the Special Branch and then the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) until he died in 2005', and that senior trade union participated in such surveillance. Regarding the SIS files relating to Bill's life, Locke writes: 'The [SIS] gave me access to the Communist Party of New Zealand years of Bill's personal file. However, to protect informants, the SIS would not allow me to see the extensive records of Bill's involvement in the Socialist Unity Party. I was told that Bill's file is so large – twenty-two volumes – it would take new staff and many months of work to declassify'. A footnote later adds: 'Once the Socialist Unity Party years of Bill's SIS personal file become available, we will learn how SIS agents infiltrated the party – 'snoopers' and 'disrupters', Alec Morgan called them – from 1966 to 1990.' I think we would learn much more than that, including the much broader story of state surveillance of trade unionists in the second half of the twentieth century, and much more about Andersen's life, too. As Locke says, we will have to await the release of the files, and perhaps the second volume of Richard Hill and Steven Loveridge's *Secret History*, to know more. Perhaps there was no way to get around the restrictions on the

files, but I thought the question of surveillance – nearly a lifetime of surveillance! - warranted more discussion, or even speculation. A historian’s attempt to get access to the files would have made a compelling story. I was left wondering: was it simply a matter of asking and getting a ‘no’? Locke worked with and interviewed the Andersen family for the book. Were the Andersen family involved in the attempt to get these files? These are two minor points, and, as Locke notes, the book is ‘a conversation opener, not an end point’.

Overall, *Comrade* is a significant contribution to our understanding of mid- to late-twentieth century trade unionism, social movements, and political life in Aotearoa New Zealand. By telling the story of Anderson’s life over such a long period, Locke connects a number of stories often told in isolation: the 1951 waterfront lockout and the cold war, the working class discontent of the 1960s and 1970s and the rise of social movements, including Māori protest and feminism, the Muldoon years and Rogernomics, the significant defeats for trade unions in the 1990s, and the state of the left reeling after those decades of change. Andersen’s life connects these stories, and all of these stories shape Andersen’s life to varying degrees. Just as Salvatore argued, we learn through this ‘social biography’ so much more about the individual and also the broader context. But the real revelation of the book is the centrality of the trade union movement to so many other social movements of these decades. It left me wondering: what has the decline of the union movement done to social movements – and to possibilities for social change – today?